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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000484

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/12/2016

TAGS: IS KISL LE PGOV PTER

SUBJECT: MGLE01: SHIA CONTACTS SAY NASRALLAH'S FEBRUARY 16 SPEECH WAS TOUGHLY WORDED, BUT SOFT IN TONE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

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**¶1.** (C) On the afternoon of February 16, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah delivered a rebuttal to

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the February 14 statements of pro-sovereignty politicians including Saad Hariri. Nasrallah was speaking at a commemoration of the 1992 assassination of then-Hizballah Secretary General Abbas Musawi. Shia observers considered

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Nasrallah's speech to be strongly worded, but noted his soft delivery. An aide to Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri cheered the speech as a sign that the Shia were not going to allow the March 14 coalition to lead the country in whatever direction it desired. Long-time Hizballah observers Dr. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb and former UNIFIL spokesman Timur Goksel saw the speech as an attempt by Nasrallah to allow the Shia community to blow off some steam in the wake of their anger at Hariri's February 14 rally. Rank-and-file Hizballah members and the average Shia were incensed by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's statements on February 14, according to Goksel. Saad-Ghorayeb observed that Nasrallah's tone was light; he even cracked a few jokes. End introduction and summary.

SHIA CONTACTS NOTE STRONG WORDS BUT GENTLE TONE

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**¶2.** (C) On February 17, Shia political analyst Mohammad Obeid told polstaff that Nasrallah's February 16 speech was firm and strong in words but soft in tone. Obeid said that Nasrallah is facing strong pressure from his base to adopt a tough position against the March 14 coalition, and particularly against MP Saad Hariri. Obeid added that Hizballah now considers Druze leader Walid Jumblatt an Israeli agent. Regarding Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's dialogue initiative, Obeid did not expect Hizballah to accept any discussion of its arms, especially with political figures it considers to be "Israelis."

**¶3.** (C) In a separate discussion on February 17, Shia journalist Abbas Sabbagh also described Nasrallah's speech as toughly worded but softly spoken. Some of the toughest comments included Nasrallah's assertion that Shia were the pillar of the "resistance," implying that Ja'Ja was an Israeli agent, and unabashedly thanking Syria for its support to the resistance. Nasrallah did not mention the March 14

coalition's calls to remove President Emile Lahoud, which Sabbagh saw as a signal to Saad Hariri that Hizballah does not share his priorities. Sabbagh also noted that Nasrallah criticized attempts to incite a civil war.

¶4. (C) Ali Hamdan, foreign affairs adviser for Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, told us that Nasrallah's speech delivered a tough message to the March 14 coalition. "If they think they can lead this country in that direction, they are wrong," declared Hamdan. Separately, a source close to Berri told us that Berri has scheduled his multi-confessional dialogue with key confessional leaders for March 2.

BLOWING OFF STEAM

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¶5. (C) On February 17, econoff discussed Nasrallah's speech with Dr. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, a Hizballah expert at Lebanese American University and a Lebanese Shia with extensive access to Hizballah members. Saad-Ghorayeb said that most Shia she talked to (most of whom are Hizballah supporters) found Nasrallah's speech to be a cool-headed, rational response to the speeches of February 14. Nasrallah wanted to show a calm manner to contrast with what many Shia viewed as inflammatory statements from Walid Jumblatt and Samir Ja'Ja', according to Saad-Ghorayeb. She commented that Nasrallah's manner of delivery was more significant than his choice of words. Nasrallah was more calm and relaxed than usual, and even told jokes. (Note: At one point in his speech Nasrallah chided: "If Syrians say Shebaa Farms is not theirs, and Palestinians say it is not theirs, and if even the Lebanese say Shebaa Farms is not Lebanese...then maybe it should be the Arab Republic of the Shebaa Farms and join the Arab League." End note.) Saad-Ghorayeb added that Nasrallah tried to paint himself as a moderate and the March 14 coalition as extremists by implying that the March 14 coalition was trying to instigate a civil war.

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¶6. (C) Former UNIFIL spokesman Timur Goksel told econoff on February 17 that he saw Nasrallah's speech as a means to let off steam in the ranks of Hizballah and in the Shia community. Goksel said that the rank-and-file in Hizballah were furious at Jumblatt's speech. He said that the Shia community was reacting to Jumblatt's rhetoric as an attack on the entire community. Nasrallah's speech was thus not surprising. It was intentionally harshly worded to assuage Shia anger and keep the tensions from escalating, according Goksel.

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